

Isaiah 58:9b-12 ~ Luke 3:7-16

"Words for the Beginning – Do the Good That is Yours to Do"

3rd Sunday of Advent ~ December 15, 2024

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Introduction to Scripture:

Don't you sometimes wish our Bible was clearer about basic facts like where and when a particular story happened? Well, today is your lucky day: your wish is granted in Luke 3:1-2. It is almost comical what pains the author of Luke took to pinpoint the coordinates, a precise GPS locator for all to know the where and when of this event. The day John the Baptist started ranting and raving: "Look out folks, our long-expected Jesus has arrived! Right here, right now."

Listen now to Luke 3:1-2. At this point in time, in this very particular place: the man was going viral. Everybody was going out to see, asking "What's the buzz, tell me what's a happenin.' The crowds had come from far and wide to get baptized by John—eager to get in on the action. Totally worth the fresh blisters they'd worn on the backs of their ankles walking much farther than they expected to. So what if their throats had become *really* dry because they had already drunk all the water they were carrying. Somehow, they knew this man was preaching truth they needed to hear. "Okay John, we're here. What have you got? Preach it."

Sermon:

"*What then should we do?*" This is the question the crowd kept asking John the Baptist that day by the River Jordan. And I am sure it is one you are asking, here in Marshfield, Wisconsin on December 15, 2024. Today, as we try to come to terms with the fatal shooting of Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare, in Manhattan on December 4. And what has followed since: the unbridled, unleashed anger across the land against the injustices of our healthcare system. Shocking to see large swaths of our nation sympathizing with the shooter rather than the victim. However, this broad valorizing of criminal behavior in our country is not new. But neither is it right. *What then should we do?*

We have watched the death toll of Palestinian civilians steadily climb in the war against Hamas in Gaza to genocidal proportions, too big to really get our minds around: nearly 44,900 people, and close to one third of them children. 16,700 children have been killed. Many of them are dying as they are trapped under the rubble and on the roads, with rescuers unable to reach them. *What then should we do?*

This week we have also watched with gratitude and surprise this week the joy of the thousands of prisoners released from prisons in Syria, reunited with their loved ones, since the swift and shockingly rapid collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's brutal oppressive regime. But this has also brought into sharp focus for all the world to see: the years of oppression and suffering under the iron hand of this authoritarian ruler. *What then should we do?*

Friends, Christ came into the world at a particular time and place that was equally fraught with similar issues of injustice, inequality, hate, and brutality. The baby Jesus was born to Mary when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great

was ruler of Galilee. The moment in time when the Creator of all the Universe of all time and all places chose to become one of us. One particular human being. He came not as a high-born Emperor, but rather as a low-born, brown-skinned, middle eastern, refugee. That's how God came to us.

This amazing, mind-boggling event has been given a helpful descriptor: the "Scandal of Particularity" by the German theologian Lesslie Newbigin. The "Scandal of Particularity" is the absurdity that God would choose to enter humanity as a particular person, in a particular place, at a particular time, among a particular culture. If you think about it: That the Second Person of the Trinity came to earth as a Jewish male, in first century Palestine, born to working class parents from a backwater town, is a scandalous idea. It puts so many limitations on the Creator of the universe that it is nearly impossible to believe. And yet we are here today: Celebrating the joy of Christ coming. We believe in a God that would love us enough to become one of us. Once.

And so we are still asking: *What then should we do?* The answer today is the same as the answer John gave to his groupies on that hot day in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." And what is that supposed to mean? That means that repenting is the *first* step. Crucial, essential, but a steppingstone that leads us on a different path of action. Opens up a new way of looking at the world. Because it isn't just about me and God and my personal savior, Jesus, stamping my ticket to heaven. Yes, our personal relationship with Jesus is important. Turning from our sins for which we are sorry is crucial. But that is just the first step.

Turning to Jesus is what gets us on the map, in the game, ready to play, ready to participate in the work of repentance, which is a team sport. Perhaps we should issue pads and helmets to everyone who joins the "Jesus Team." Beware: There *will* be unnecessary roughness. And God needs everyone playing on God's team. Moving the ball down the field in the same direction, no matter the blocks and tackles. On Team Jesus: there is no bench, there is no second string. And we are all playing with injuries—some healed and some fresh. Hurt and hurting, God is calling us, the walking (sometimes running) wounded.

Consider for a moment this sparkling example of what we humans working together can do! On December 7th, in Paris, France the world celebrated the restoration and reopening of the historic Notre Dame Cathedral, just five years after the devastating fire that threatened to destroy it in 2019. The reopening celebrations will continue until tomorrow, Dec. 16. This astonishing accomplishment was achieved with over 2,000 hours of labor, and over 2,000 masons, carpenters, restorers, roofers, foundry-workers, art experts, sculptors and engineers. After five years of silence, the bell of Notre-Dame rang out across Paris, marking the rebirth of this cathedral and a sign of renewal of the church of France. Surely this is a joyful testimony to what we can accomplish, when folks do what they can, small as it may be, to contribute to the restoration of a building.

Could we also work together with this kind of energy, this kind of symbiosis of talent and dedication to transform our healthcare system, our immigration system, our caretaking of this one beautiful precious planet that is dying on our watch? You may wish that I would just “stick to the Bible” here on the Third Sunday of Advent. And, in fact, I am. To say “yes” to Jesus, to repent and to ask, “*What then should we do?*” leads us to be political. Why? John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ knew that everything they said and did was political. That is why they both proclaimed Love Divine and both were killed by the Roman Empire.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves, sharing our second coat with anyone who has none is an individual decision, an individual turn. But it also has economic consequences. It is a directive that pushes back against an economy that tells us more is better. John’s directive to tax collectors: stop collecting kickbacks, was a challenge for them to turn away from the standard of the corrupt industry at the time. I hear God challenging us to think together how we can take steps to right the wrongs that are harming people’s health and killing our planet on which we all depend. I hear God calling us to work together to right the wrongs of peoples long silenced, abused, ignored. That is why we are a Matthew 25 church. Doing our best to act on Jesus’ call.

What then should we do? As the title of this sermon tells us, “Do the good that is yours to do.” That means something different to each of us. As I preach today and look at your beautiful faces, beloved community, most of us are aware that in less than three weeks, I will no longer be your pastor. I am vocalizing this elephant in the room, because while it may feel like an elephant right now, it can also be considered a caterpillar that will become a beautiful butterfly. Whether we can see that yet, or not. As we are all preparing for this transition time, the title of this sermon, “Do the good that is yours to do” can help to guide us in this transition time that we are right now going through, together.

Some of you have been members of FPC for over half a century or more, others just over a half a year. I know that God has called all of you here as part of the FPC faith family for a reason. Particularly right now. You as individuals: Each of you has unique gifts and perspectives needed to make us whole. Whether you are a first- or third-time visitor: it is not a coincidence that God is drawing you into our midst at a time such as this. You wouldn’t know this yet, but we are a church that is *not* clergy dependent. And that is a wonderful thing! It is a mark of being Presbyterians and, in my book, of effective leadership.

Already I have been amazed at the ways y’all, both long-time members and members new to FPC, are stepping up into new or augmented roles of leadership to pave the way for the transition time that will begin officially on January 1. Your Transition Team, Interim Pastor Search Team, Session, and I are grateful for all the ways you have raised your hand when asked to lead, coordinate, and support the ministries and missions, as well as the fun and fellowship during this transition time. At the Forum for All today after worship, we will distribute and detail a handy chart that maps out who is taking the lead for what. I thank those who already are working tirelessly to prepare for as smooth a transition as possible.

Friends, backing out the lens for a moment, looking beyond our immediate context: we are well aware of the economic and political threats, the hateful talk and cruel actions abroad in our land and world that may make us want to close our eyes or head for the hills. Like those folks asked John the Baptist, you may be asking right now, "*what then should we do?*" Rabbi Rami Shapiro has offered this rephrasing of Micah 6:8. In it I find encouragement, direction, and truth to light our path. It goes like this: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."ⁱ We are not free to abandon the work because Christ is depending on you to do the good that is only yours to do.

God put you on this earth for just this reason. No matter how limited you may be physically, as long as you can still draw breath, there is plenty of good that you can do. Many of you are living testimony to this truth. An extreme example is a woman on our delivery route for Marshfield Hospital's "Home Delivery of Meals" program. She is 100 years old and is gunning for 101 in February. Delivering her meal is a bright spot on our route. Her smile, her gratitude for life and her noonday meal are gifts that do my heart good. And I'm sure they are gifts to the others who get to deliver her meals.

St. Catherine of Siena lived in Italy, from 1347-1380. The year she was born, 1347, was the same year that the bubonic plague, known as the "Black Death" pandemic swept across Europe and eventually killed about one-third of Europe's entire population. At a scary time when most people of status fled the city of Siena, Catherine did not. Instead, she chose to do what she could and threw herself into serving those affected by the deadly disease. She organized a group of volunteers to nurse the ill and located clergy to provide the sacraments for the sick. She died when she was only 33, from a stroke. Catherine became a medieval saint and was made a "Doctor of the Church" in 1970, having devoted her life to helping the poor, the ill, and the spiritually underprivileged. I am guessing that these titles may have surprised her, given that she was simply following what Christ had called her to do.

We have a quote from St. Catherine that has been a touchstone for me throughout my ministry. I have it on my office door, and it goes like this: "*Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.*" Beloved community: you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and the fire of Christ Jesus. Bear fruits worthy of repentance by doing the good that is yours to do. That will bring joy to God, joy to the world, and joy to you. Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*, (Harmony/Bell Tower, 1995), p.41. This is a paraphrase of Rabbi Rami Shapiro's interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfan's work on the Pirke Avot 2:20. And was quoted in "Words for the Beginning" Advent Devotional, A Sanctified Art LLC, p.21.